SODHA TRAVEL

Cambodia

DESTINATION GUIDE

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Welcome. Svakom.

Before your trip, we ask that you familiarize yourself with essential information about Cambodian customs and travel protocol. Your unforgettable journey awaits!

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About

Formerly known as Kampuchea, the Kingdom of Cambodia is nestled in SE Asia. Once considered the most beautiful city in the Orient, the capital of Phnom Penh retains its colonial charm and picturesque location along the confluence of the Mekong and Tonlé Sap rivers. The country shares borders with Thailand to the west and northwest, Laos to the northeast, Vietnam to the east, and the Gulf of Thailand to the southwest. Cambodia's geographic terrain is predominantly characterized by low plains, adorned with mountains to the southwest and north.

When exploring Cambodia, you'll encounter two prominent natural features. The majestic Mekong River gracefully flows from north to south, traversing the entire length of the country. Additionally, the captivating Tonlé Sap Lake adds to Cambodia's picturesque landscape. Cambodia boasts an array of valuable natural resources, including oil and gas, timber, gemstones, iron ore, manganese, phosphates, and hydropower potential.

Fast Facts

- **Location:** SE Asia bordered by Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and the Gulf of Thailand.
- **Capital:** Phnom Penh
- **Population:** 16.7 million
- **Government:** Parliamentary Constitutional Monarchy
- **Official Language:** Khmer
- **International Dialing Code:** +855

History

During the 9th to 14th centuries, Cambodia experienced its Golden Age, known as the Angkor period. It was a flourishing empire that exerted its dominance over most of inland Southeast Asia. However, the grandeur of Angkor would eventually succumb to internal conflicts within the royalty and constant battles with its increasingly powerful neighbors, notably Siam and Dai Viet. Nevertheless, remnants of this era, such as Bayon and Angkor Wat, continue to stand as a testament to the splendor of Khmer arts and culture. These architectural marvels are scattered across Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, reminding us of the remarkable achievements of the Khmer civilization. The profound influence of Angkorian culture can still be observed today in neighboring kingdoms like Thailand and Laos, which share close characteristics with present-day Cambodia.

Visa

For most foreigners, a visa is required to visit Cambodia. Travelers can facilitate the eVisa online prior to departure or have it processed upon arrival at the Phnom Penh and Siem Reap airports. (Due to extended wait times, we recommend securing the eVisa in advance.)

Vaccinations

While no specific vaccinations are required to enter Cambodia, we highly recommend Hepatitis A/B and being current on Tetanus. Malaria and Dengue Fever are prevalent, especially during monsoon season, so please speak to your physician or travel clinic. If you're taking any medication, be sure to pack an adequate supply.

Medical

While there are a few Thai-run hospitals in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, the overall quality of medical care throughout Cambodia is limited and often inadequate. Be prepared for doctors and hospitals to request cash payments or written guarantees from insurance providers in advance for any required health services.

In many cases, medical evacuation to neighboring countries like Thailand or Singapore become necessary to access the appropriate level of treatment. To ensure peace of mind, it's highly recommended to obtain travel insurance that includes coverage for air evacuation and hospital stays.

Currency

The official currency is the Cambodian Riel (KHR). However, you'll find that the US Dollar is widely accepted as a secondary currency almost everywhere. Keep in mind that when receiving change, it's likely to be given in Riels.

You can easily exchange your currency for Riels at foreign exchange offices located at the airport or any bank throughout the country. Remember that independent exchange offices may have higher commission rates. Most ATMs offer US Dollars and allow withdrawals of up to $500 at a time. In rural or less tourist-driven areas, the use of credit cards is not as common. Therefore, it's advisable to always carry some cash with you. Hotels and restaurants generally accept credit card payments.

Money Exchange / ATM's / Credit Cards

ATMs are widely available in popular destinations like Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. However, if you plan to explore remote territories, it's recommended to obtain cash before your journey. ANZ, Canadia Bank, and Acleda Bank have ATMs located throughout Cambodia. Additionally, you'll find ATMs at the airport and popular tourist spots, ensuring convenient access to cash. Please remember to cover your hand when entering your PIN to safeguard against skimming.

Depending on your bank, overseas ATM withdrawals may incur fees ranging from $4 to $6, including currency conversion charges. Don't forget to inform your bank about your travel plans to avoid any inconvenience. If your bank detects a foreign transaction without prior knowledge of your travels, they might freeze your card as a security measure. Changing money within the city is hassle-free, with numerous money exchange offices located on main roads in larger cities. Licensed money changers often offer slightly better rates compared to banks, as some banks charge flat fees per transaction. It's important to note that banks generally only exchange currencies on weekdays.

Gratuities

While tipping is not generally expected in Cambodia, a small gesture can have a significant impact due to the country's low wages. In hotels, it's customary to tip bellmen who assist with luggage. Additionally, if you receive exceptional service, such as repairs or favors, a tip of $1 to $2 USD is appropriate. However, tipping front-desk workers and concierges is not a common practice.

When using taxis or tuk-tuks, rounding up the fare or leaving small change as a tip is appreciated, especially for longer journeys or outstanding service. For guides and private drivers, it is customary to offer around 10% of the tour cost as a tip. In other situations, such as receiving massages or salon services, a tip of 5% to 10% is suitable. Ultimately, tipping serves as a gesture of appreciation and should be based on the quality of service you receive.

Time Zone

Cambodia follows GMT + 7 and it does not use a daylight-saving system.

Language

Khmer, the official language of Cambodia, is a linguistic gem that stems from the Mon-Khmer (Austro-Asiatic) language family. It holds the distinction of boasting one of the largest sets of alphabets, including 33 consonants, 23 vowels, and 12 independent vowels.

English is widely spoken and understood in most parts of the country. French takes the position of the second language after English, with many elderly Cambodians speaking fluently. Additionally, the Chinese language has a significant presence, reflecting the vibrant Cambodian Ethnic Chinese population with dialects like Teochew and Cantonese blending harmoniously.

To enhance your cultural experience, consider learning a few spoken phrases in the Khmer language. It will surely add a delightful touch to your interactions and make your journey even more memorable. Keep in mind that the Khmer or Cambodian language is not limited to Cambodia alone—it is also spoken by approximately 1.3 million people in southeastern Thailand and over a million people in the southern regions of Vietnam.

Food and Water

Cambodian cuisine is renowned for its delicate fusion of diverse spices and flavors, rooted in the country's rich history and culture. The bedrock of most dishes is kroeung, a unique spice blend of cloves, cinnamon, star anise, nutmeg, cardamom, ginger, and turmeric. Local flavors such as galangal, garlic, shallots, lemongrass, cilantro, and kaffir lime leaf further embellish these combinations, resulting in a complex yet balanced palate. The depth of Cambodian cuisine is elevated using pra-hok, a strong fermented fish paste, and kapi, a fermented prawn paste.

Rice is a mainstay in Cambodian meals, serving as the perfect partner to a wide array of curries, soups, and stir-fries. The country's bounty of rice variations offers a gastronomic treat, from the aromatic grains to the diverse types of glutinous rice that feature in salads or as a sweet accompaniment to fruits. A traditional Cambodian meal typically features rice and a minimum of three separate dishes, including a customary soup known as samlor. Each dish presents a unique fusion of sweet, sour, salty, and bitter elements, striking a harmonious balance. Chilli is typically served on the side, allowing everyone to customize their meal to their preference, a testament to the culinary diversity of Cambodia.

In terms of water safety, both tap water and bottled water may be compromised if not processed and handled correctly, regardless of clarity and color. It's advisable to consume water that has been:

- Bottled or canned by a reputable manufacturer with an intact seal.
- Boiled, cooled, and stored in a clean container.
- Chemically disinfected or passed through a reliable water filter and kept in a clean container.

Clothing

Cambodia's climate is typically characterized by two distinct seasons: the dry season from November to April and the wet season from May to October. For the dry season, when the weather is warm and humid, clothing made of lightweight, breathable materials like cotton is advisable. Loose-fitting clothes that promote ventilation will make your experience more comfortable. Long pants and long-sleeved shirts are also useful for those interested in outdoor activities like hiking or trekking. Essential accessories for navigating the bright, sunny days include a hat and sunglasses. During the wet season, carry a light rain poncho or a robust umbrella. Pack a light jacket or cardigan for the relatively cooler months of December and January.

When visiting temples or other religious sites in Cambodia, visitors are advised to follow a dress code of long trousers or skirt which covers the knees as well as covered shoulders. Skirts, short shorts, tank tops, and revealing clothing are culturally insensitive and not allowed.

It is customary to remove shoes and hats at the entrance of pagodas. More formal attire is required for visits to the Silver Pagoda, located within the Royal Palace grounds. Men should opt for long trousers while women should choose long trousers or skirts, ensuring their shoulders are covered.

Shopping

Cambodia presents an unforgettable shopping adventure with its bustling local bazaars brimming with local crafts. Shoppers can discover intricately carved sculptures, handcrafted textiles, exquisite silverware, and beautiful jewelry, all testament to the exceptional skill of Khmer craftsmen. Cambodia is also famed for its unique rice wine, a rich concoction infused with an array of fruits and spices, which has become a favored keepsake among travelers. Furthermore, the nation takes pride in its locally spun silk fabrics, with the traditional cotton Khmer scarf, known as Krama, and the luxurious Khmer Golden Silk being iconic textiles. From the bustling markets of Siem Reap to the upscale malls in Phnom Penh, Cambodia offers a broad spectrum of memorable purchases that capture the country's rich cultural tapestry and artisanal heritage.

In Siem Reap, markets such as AHA Fair Trade Village and Siem Reap Art Centre Market welcome visitors with a treasure trove of sculptures, textiles, and unique handicrafts. For those seeking a contemporary retail experience, malls like Aeon Mall in Phnom Penh offer a comprehensive selection of products, from high-street fashion to skincare, and a range of organic food items from international brands. In the bustling capital city of Phnom Penh, markets like the Russian Market and the Central Market are sought-after destinations for souvenirs, jewelry, antiques, and aromatic spices. These markets create a dynamic setting where travelers can immerse themselves in the local culture, engage with amicable vendors, and even test their bargaining prowess.

Entertainment and Nightlife

The nightlife scene in Cambodia primarily caters to the local crowd, but it also provides plenty of options for foreigners with a range of bars, restaurants, and clubs. Some establishments are open 24/7 while others keep the party going until the early morning hours. Restaurants typically mirror the nightlife, operating late into the night. The 'pub streets' and riverside boulevards in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh are bustling hubs of nightlife activity. Sihanoukville is notable for its numerous casinos. For a more relaxed experience, the islands of Koh Rong and Koh Rong Sanloem offer laidback beach bars with stunning views.

Locals

Cambodians are renowned for being some of the most hospitable and amicable people in Southeast Asia. As you traverse the country, you will find yourself welcomed by heart-warming smiles and kind words wherever you venture. The Khmer ethnic group forms the major segment of the population, constituting approximately 90-94%, while the rest is composed of diverse groups: Cham, indigenous highland communities, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Vietnamese, along with smaller minority groups such as the Khmer Krom and the Kuy people. However, the government formally acknowledges only the Cham and Khmer Loeu communities - a term increasingly associated with Khmer nationalism. Instead of aligning with the international label of indigenous peoples, the government refers to these communities as ethnic minorities.

Social Etiquette

- Always ask for permission before taking photographs of Cambodian people or monks.
- Remove your shoes when entering places of worship, such as pagodas or temples. Dress modestly, covering your upper arms and legs, and remove hats.
- Take off your shoes when entering someone's home.
- Greet others respectfully by bowing your head slightly and pressing your hands together at the chest (known as "Sampeah").
- If invited to dine in a Cambodian family's home, consider bringing a small gift like fruit, dessert, or flowers for the host.
- When using a toothpick at the table, cover your mouth with one hand.
- Present and accept business cards with both hands.
- Avoid pointing at someone with your feet.
- Refrain from touching a Cambodian person on the head.
- Keep public displays of affection to a respectful minimum.

Religion

Theravada Buddhism holds a significant place as the official and most widely practiced religion in Cambodia. Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity also find acceptance in Cambodian society. To avoid offending local sensibilities, travelers are encouraged to show respect to Buddha statues and images. Irrespective of the diversity in religious beliefs, Cambodia fosters a harmonious and unified society.

Festivals and Holidays

Cambodia is rich in cultural and traditional festivals that are primarily determined by the Cambodian lunar calendar. These events are deeply influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism, and royal customs.

Weather and Climate

Like much of SE Asia, Cambodia enjoys a warm and humid climate almost all year round, with average temperatures hovering around 80-81ºF. The country experiences two distinct seasons. The wet season, lasting from May to October, is responsible for about 75% of the annual rainfall. Rainfall is typically heavy, especially during the peak wet months from July to September, often resulting in heavy showers for a few hours rather than all-day rain. Despite this, the wet season offers its own charm, transforming the country into a verdant paradise, and sites like Angkor Wat gain a unique allure. With fewer tourists, this can be an attractive period for those who prefer less crowded destinations.

Contrastingly, the dry season extends from October to April under the influence of the northeast monsoon. This phase is marked by dry, hot, and dusty conditions, with April often recording high temperatures. The dry season coincides with Cambodia's peak tourist season, attracting visitors in search of sunny weather. During this period, beach locales like Kep, Sihanoukville, and Ko Kong offer clear skies, tranquil waters, and abundant sunshine, making them an idyllic choice for beach lovers.

Transportation

Numerous transportation alternatives are available in Cambodia to cater to varied tastes and budgets. Tuk-tuks are widely used for short distances and local sightseeing, comfortably accommodating 3-4 people. Cyclos present an old-worldly, leisurely way to tour cities like Phnom Penh. Car rentals provide independence and convenience but can be pricey; employing a driver is recommended for an easier journey. Shared taxis are a quicker alternative to public buses and cheaper than renting a car, although passengers should anticipate crowded conditions and insist on using a taximeter. For the adventurous, motorbikes or scooters offer an exciting way to discover lesser-known locales, while bicycles are perfect for a serene journey, especially in rural regions. The prices for renting motorbikes and bicycles are typically reasonable, enabling visitors to enjoy the enchanting landscapes of Cambodia.

Communication

The communication infrastructure in Cambodia has seen considerable improvements. Travelers can easily purchase SIM cards for hassle-free local and international calls. The accessibility of the internet and Wi-Fi has improved significantly, and the country's postal service also remains reliable. Most hotels are likely to provide free Wi-Fi. Numerous cafes, coffee shops, and upscale restaurants also offer complimentary or reasonably priced Wi-Fi, when you order food or beverages.

Electricity

In Cambodia, the standard voltage is 230 V, and the standard frequency is 50 Hz.

Laundry

Hotel-based laundry services are an option, although these can be quite expensive. Fortunately, affordable laundry services are widely available across the country. Look for the abundant signage advertising laundry services - these typically charge by kilogram and offer an economical alternative.

Safety

Generally, Cambodia is a safe destination with a low crime rate. However, like many destinations, minor instances of theft targeted at tourists can occur. Visitors should remain vigilant against pickpocketing and bag theft, particularly in crowded spaces and markets.

Avoid areas near the Thai border, as you may encounter unscrupulous agents attempting to overcharge for visas. Also, exercise caution when using taxis and tuk-tuks, given that the condition of the roads and traffic can pose considerable risk. Always stay on marked pathways, as the threat of active land mines persists.